

VZCZCXRO5002  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHGB #0624/01 0691116  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 101116Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2087  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000624

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: PRT SALAH AD DIN: PILGRIMAGE SIGNALS  
RECONCILIATION PROGRESS IN SAMARRA

REF: A. 08BAGHDAD 3994  
[1](#)B. 08BAGHDAD 3456  
[1](#)C. 08BAGHDAD 3418

Classified By: PRT Leader Rick Bell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is a PRT Salah ad Din reporting cable.

[1](#)2. (U) SUMMARY: The predominantly Sunni city of Samarra in Salah Ad Din (SAD) province has made significant progress in Sunni and Shi'a reconciliation. On March 6, up to three million Shi'a pilgrims from Karbala, Baghdad and elsewhere visited the Golden Dome mosque, a major Shi'a shrine in the city. The mass pilgrimage was the first since the mosque was bombed in 2006, and was a notable departure from the Sunni-Shi'a animosity that followed the bombing. Firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr attached his name to the event, urging both his followers and Sunni Muslims to go to the mosque as a sign of Iraqi unity. Several other key events preceded the pilgrimage and reinforced the sense of reconciliation in Samarra: a strong turnout of Samarra's voters in provincial elections, winning 11 of 28 Provincial Council (PC) seats for Samarra candidates; an agreement with Shiite PM Maliki to give the city greater control in Golden Dome Mosque reconstruction, and a successful visit of a high-level Shi'a delegation from Karbala on February 24. END SUMMARY.

-----  
THE MARCH 6 PILGRIMAGE  
-----

[1](#)3. (U) On March 6, Shi'a Muslims commemorated the death of the eleventh Imam, Hassan Al Askari. Traditionally, Shi'a make a pilgrimage to his gravesite within the Golden Dome Mosque in Samarra, but the bombing of the mosque in 2006 limited access to it and raised security issues over the past three years. This year was the first time since then that great numbers of pilgrims returned to the city. The numbers may have increased in part because Muqtada Al Sadr called for Shi'a and Sunni pilgrims to march to Samarra together as a sign of Iraqi unity.

[1](#)4. (U) Visitors began arriving in Samarra on foot, at dawn, on March 5. By noon, about 1,000 people per hour were entering the city. By afternoon on March 6, over 50,000 visitors per hour were arriving in a continuous column that stretched over four kilometers from the west side of the Tigris River, across the river, and through the city to the Mosque. Loudspeakers welcomed pilgrims to the city, and groups flying banners or flags were welcomed by name. Muqtada Al Sadr's followers were arriving in force by early afternoon and were welcomed as well. This was a historic day for Samarra and the nation. Local people hope Samarra will now become a symbol of peaceful reconciliation and cooperation.

[1](#)5. (C) MG Rasheed, Samarra Operations Center Commander, prohibited pilgrims from carrying ceremonial swords and other implements for ritual self-flagellation along the march. The

sheikhs of Samarra and Karbala and many of the convoys from various mosques in the south set up major food distribution stations along the route and the SaD Provincial Government gave the city 100 percent support in preparing for the security, health and well being of the visitors. The JCC and PJCC successfully implemented security plans with CF support standing by, and IA helicopters circled overhead for the first time since the liberation.

-----  
OTHER SIGNS OF RECONCILIATION IN SAMARRA  
-----

¶6. (C) Since the bombing of the Golden Mosque in February 2006, rumors concerning who was responsible for the attack have caused deep-seated animosity among Shi'a areas of Iraq toward the city of Samarra and its predominantly Sunni residents. Samarrans believe this animosity has been used as a lever by outsiders to hinder reconstruction efforts in the city and control the reconstruction of the Golden Dome Mosque to the exclusion of local input. Samarra residents are resentful of the Shi'a dominated Government of Iraqi (GoI) and suspect that the GoI is plotting to take control of the center of the city. It is widely suspected that Iranian interests are moving with the support of the GoI to take control of key properties throughout the city to create an infrastructure suitable for religious pilgrimage rather than the more open and non-sectarian atmosphere desired by Samarra residents. For over a year the Satellite PRT in Samarra has worked with local officials and prominent citizens to build bridges among local, provincial, and national stakeholders in order to reach the level of understanding necessary to

BAGHDAD 00000624 002 OF 002

expedite reconstruction of the city.

¶7. (C) During PM Maliki's visit to the city just before the Provincial Council (PC) elections in January, the Qaimmaqam ("Mayor") and Qada Council Chairman from Samarra asked Maliki to stop unilateral planning for the economic area in the immediate vicinity of the Mosque and to honor the city leaders' desire to retain its basic character and design. Maliki agreed, and a Samarra delegation will attend a March 18 planning session sponsored by the GoI Ministry of Municipalities.

¶8. (SBU) The most significant recent event is Samarra's full embrace of the electoral process during the PC elections. Some 78 percent of Samarra's eligible citizens voted and elected 11 members from 8 lists to the SaD PC. Samarra citizens now have the largest bloc of votes in the PC and are meeting together to discuss the economic and political possibilities this presents. Parties from other cities are contacting the newly elected Samarra representatives to build alliances and discuss future directions for SaD. This new empowerment is leading local officials to take a more confident stance in discussions with the GoI on the future of the city, and a new willingness to take a proactive approach in direct reconciliation with other cities.

-----  
SAMARRA HOSTS KARBALA  
-----

¶9. (SBU) In late January Suheil Najm Abed (aka Haji Suheil), a highly respected Samarra native who resides in Jordan, and prominent Samarra sheiks, civic leaders, and military commanders held a series of meetings to plan meetings with the people of Najaf and Karbala, aimed at dispelling misunderstandings and false information concerning security and attitudes in Samarra. As a result of these meetings, Samarra officials invited prominent Najaf and Karbala officials, sheikhs, and clerics to visit Samarra in friendship. On February 24, an official delegation of 200 Karbalites visited Samarra; they were joined by approximately

800 other unofficial visitors from Karbala, including more than 20 Sheikhs of tribes from Karbala. The delegation was headed by the leaders of the two Karbala Shrines: Abdul Mahdi Al Karbalai, General Secretary of Hussainia House, and a representative from Ahmed Al Safi, General Secretary of Al Abassia House.

¶10. (SBU) The delegation was welcomed to Samarra and residents from both cities spent the day getting to know each other. Haji Suheil and the Samarra sheikhs paid all expenses for the delegation's trip, including lunch for 200 of the visitors. In speeches before leaving the city, the delegates from Karbala expressed pleasant surprise at the warm reception they had received and praised the progress the city was making in clearing rubble and restoring order. All pledged to work together in restoring good relations between their cities and to support an end to sectarian mistrust. This renewed friendship by local initiative will almost certainly have a positive impact on national reconciliation efforts and will have the added benefit of boosting the local economy in SaD's largest city through increased tourism.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶11. (SBU) The March 6 pilgrimage will have immediate effects in both Samarra and nationally. Samarra has demonstrated that sectarian differences need not divide Iraq and that the Shi'a-led GoI can work closely with a major Sunni city effectively for the good of all Iraqis. The economic impact in Samarra was significant. Visitors were permitted to make purchases in local shops on a large scale for the first time since 2006. This sets the stage for a gradual opening up of the central city to a more free circulation of visitors and a significant boost in revenues from tourism. Many Iranian faithful were intermixed with the crowd of visitors and were also welcomed by Samarrans. Samarra is now beginning to shed its image as a symbol of sectarian violence and gradually resume its rightful place as a national historic treasure and tourist destination. PM Maliki's effort to reconstruct the Golden Dome Mosque can move briskly toward completion, and the special budgets created for restoration and expansion of city services can move forward at the same pace. END COMMENT.  
BUTENIS